

ELEMENTAL RELIGION.

“O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me.”—PSALM CXXXIX. 1.

I ONCE heard a well-known man, speaking of difficulties in the Bible, express himself between jest and earnest in this fashion: “The Gospels are a story, and a story may conceivably be untrue; the epistles are arguments, and arguments may conceivably be unsound; but the Psalms are the immediate reflection of personal experiences, and we can take them as they stand without asking any questions.” Certainly that is true of the 139th Psalm, which even in the Psalter has an eminence of its own, and brings us into contact with elemental religion, with the soul’s direct and overwhelming experience of God. None of us could have written it, but there is none of us in whom there is not an echo to its sublime and solemn utterance; and that echo is the spirit of God, bearing witness by and with His word in our hearts.

The Psalm has four strophes, each of six verses; and in each of the four an essential aspect or element in the soul’s experience of God absorbs the mind of the writer. It will repay us if in following his thought his experience in any degree becomes ours.

1. First, he is overpowered by the experience of God’s perfect knowledge of him.

We are apt to speak in this connexion of God’s omniscience, but there is nothing about omniscience in

the Psalm. Omniscience is an abstract noun, and abstract nouns are unequal to the intense feeling of the passage. The important thing in religion is not the belief that God is omniscient, but the experience that God knows me, and it is on this the Psalmist dwells. (It is almost implied in the connexion of his words that in the heart of the writer there was a kind of passive resistance to this experience, a resistance which God's spirit overcame, piercing and discovering all his inner life. We are slow to know ourselves, and sometimes do not wish to ; purposes form in the background of our minds, of which we are hardly conscious ; latent motives actuate us ; perhaps our own words or deeds, in which they suddenly issue, startle us ; we are amazed that we should have said or done such a thing. But it is no surprise to Him.) "Thou understandest my thought afar off." Such knowledge of man by God is quite different from omniscience. Omniscience is a divine attribute, but what is here experienced is a divine action—it is God through His searching knowledge of us entering with power into our lives. It is God besetting us behind and before, and laying His hand upon us. The Psalmist does not dwell particularly on the divine motive, so to speak, in this searching of man. It might be felt as the shadowing of the soul by an enemy, or as the over-shadowing presence of a friend. The one thing on which he does dwell is its reality and its completeness. It is too wonderful for him ; it baffles him when he tries to understand it ; but incomprehensible as it is, it is real. He only knows himself as he is conscious of being searched and known by God.

I suppose most of us have wrestled with arguments

intended to prove the existence or the personality of God. Well, I am not going to raise any philosophical question about the powers or the incapacities of human reasoning in this matter. No religion ever took its origin in such reasoning, however it may have succeeded or been baffled in trying to justify itself at reason's bar. The being and the personality of God, so far as there is any religious interest in them, are not to be *proved* by arguments; they are to be *experienced* in the kind of experience here described. The man who can say, *O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me*, does not need any arguments to prove that God is, and that He is a person, and that He has an intimate and importunate interest in his life. If that is a real experience—as who will deny that it is?—and if it is not a morbid phenomenon, but one which is sane and normal, then the *thou* in it is just as real as the *me*. The Psalmist is as certain of God as he is of his own existence; indeed it is not too much to say that it is only as he is conscious of being searched and known by God—only as he is overwhelmed by contact with a spirit which knows him better than he knows himself—that he rises to any adequate sense of what his own being and personality mean. He is revealed to himself by God's search; he knows himself through God. Speaking practically—and in religion everything is practical—God alone can overcome atheism, and this is how He overcomes it. He does not put arguments within our reach which point to theistic conclusions; He gives us the experience which makes this Psalm intelligible, and forces us also to cry, *O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me*. “After that ye have known God,” says St. Paul to the Galatians,

“or rather”—correcting himself—“have been known by God.” Yes, it is the overpowering sense that we are known through and through by another which seals upon our hearts that knowledge of God on which religion rests.

2. The second strophe of the Psalm deals with another aspect or element in the writer's experience of God. There is indeed something unreal in calling it another, for all experiences of God are interdependent. Still, it inspires the Psalmist anew; his soul, which has sunk exhausted under the thought of God's absolute knowledge of him, rallies itself to speak of God's wonderful and inevitable presence with him. And here again we should take care not to lose ourselves and the profit of this high experience by speaking of God's omnipresence. No doubt if we were constructing a doctrine of God, we should have need and room for such a term; but in religion the important thing is not the idea that God is everywhere, but the experience that wherever I am God is with me. “Whither shall I go from Thy spirit, or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?” Why, it may be asked, should we want to go anywhere? Why should we try to escape from God? The answer does not need to be given, because every one can give it for himself. The first man tried to hide from God, and so have all his children, but always in vain. Wilful boys try, experimenting with their new-found liberty, and God makes His presence felt through all their riot. Worldly men try, absorbed in affairs they had rather keep to themselves, renouncing church and sabbath, Bible and reflexion; but when they least expect it, a light or a shadow falls on their path, and they know that God is

there ; sensual men try it in dissipation, and desperate men even in death ; but there is no height nor depth nor distance nor darkness that can shut Him out of our life. As St. Augustine says, the only way to flee from God is to flee to Him. The voice which says in our hearts, Where art thou ? is not meant to drive us from Him, but to make us conscious of His presence, and to urge us to turn consciously to Him. There is only one thing which can really separate us from God, and that is a secret. A secret always divides. It divides more in proportion as the relation which it annuls is close. It may divide fatally husband and wife ; it divides fatally the soul and God, raising an invisible but insuperable wall between them, and keeping us far from Him even while He is intimately near to us. Do not cut yourself off from God by any unconfessed sin, by any unavowed hope, by anything that makes you restrain prayer or try to avoid His presence. It is not far to seek and to find Him. He is near to all that call upon Him in truth. To find His presence not a dread but an inspiration, He asks nothing of us but that we should walk in the light as He is in the light, and have no secrets from Him.

3. The third strophe of the Psalm, the third element in the Psalmist's experience of God, seems at the first glance to be of a different character, yet it is closely connected with what precedes. Observe how it is linked on by *for*. "For Thou hast formed my reins : Thou hast knit me together in my mother's womb." Here, it may be said, we are not dealing with immediate experience ; there is an element of inference in the writer's conviction which is introduced by the *for*. God is at first, so to speak, an observer, and then a

companion; but what is implied in an observer so searching, in a companion so close and inseparable? To the mind of the Psalmist what is implied is that his very being has its ground in God, and that the whole marvel and mystery of what he is go back to Him. If it were not so, God could not have the knowledge of him or the nearness to him by which he is so deeply impressed. At first he thinks of himself as an inhabitant of the moral world, and there God is an awful observer, an inevitable presence; now he thinks of himself as a native of what we call the physical universe, only to realize that there also the presence and action of God are as pervasive as in the higher sphere. It is not exaggerating or misrepresenting him if we say that the truth to which expression is given in the third section of the Psalm is the truth that the physical and the moral worlds, as we call them, are one in God—that He whose moral sovereignty has been so deeply felt and so wonderfully described in the world of conscious life is the author of nature too—and that nature and human nature, in each individual human being, through all variations of condition and circumstance, are determined by Him and are continually in His hand. “My frame was not hidden from Thee when I was made in secret . . . in Thy book were they all written, even the days which were ordained, when as yet there was none of them.” In all that we are, in the very frame and texture of our being; in all that befalls us, in the length of our life and its vicissitudes, we are absolutely dependent on God. That in a manner explains how we can have the wonderful experiences of God before described; only the author of our being could have such a close and unremitting interest in us.

There are few things more to be desired at the present moment than the power to realize this truth. Partly we have got into the habit of defining the physical and the moral worlds simply by contrast with each other, as if we had not to live at the same time in both, and as if that did not imply their ultimate unity ; and partly we are accustomed to appeal to the lower against the higher. How, a man asks, can I, a creature with such a nature, face a spiritual calling ? How can I ever be anything but what I am ? There is no proportion between the constitution which nature has given me and the vocation with which God summons me. Or the same thing is said about circumstances. How can anyone born in the conditions in which I was, and compelled to live in the environment in which I live, be anything but the miserable creature you see ? These are dangerous things to say. No one ever says them for himself with quite a good conscience, and their moral unsoundness is shown by the fact that the compassion for others which they inspire turns only too easily into contempt. Surely the Psalmist has the deep truth in his grasp when he reminds us that God is not only intimately with us in our moral life, but that He is in and behind our nature and our circumstances—that He fashioned us in the womb and that all our days were written in His book—that He commits us to no conflict in which He does not stand behind us—that no nature is so disabled, no circumstances so disabling, as to shut a man out from the care and the providence of his Maker. One of the striking things in the Psalm is the tone in which the writer speaks of this at the close of this strophe. The omniscience and omnipresence of God, as they come home to the in-

dividual conscience in the moral world, have something oppressive in them ; they awe and overwhelm us ; but as resting on God's creation of us, and His providential ordering of our lives, they are transfigured with tenderness ; the Psalmist is not haunted by God, but abandons himself with joy to His care. "How precious also are Thy thoughts unto me, O God ; how great is the sum of them ! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand ; when I awake, I am still with Thee." No doubt these words repeat in a new connexion what has been already said in the first section—"such knowledge is too wonderful for me ; it is high, I cannot attain unto it"—but they contain something more. They are an echo of the touching words in the 103rd Psalm : "Like as a father pitieth his children, the Lord pitieth them that fear Him" ; they are an anticipation of St. Peter's words in the New Testament—"Commit your souls to Him in well doing as to a faithful Creator." Whoever betrays us, our Creator will not. With all its disabilities and limitations, and in spite of all its corruptions, human nature is dear to its author. "I will give thanks unto Thee, for I am awfully and wonderfully made ; wonderful are Thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well." It is only when we shut God out of nature—as no one can do who has had in his nature the experience out of which man cries, O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me—that we can look on it in ourselves or others with contempt or despair. For the human creature to know the faithful Creator is to know that he has not been made in vain, and to be assured that through whatever conflicts he can rise and live in a world where inspired utterances like those of this Psalm will fall upon his ear

through nature and awaken echoes in his inmost soul.

4. And now we come to the last strophe of the Psalm. I have spoken of all the others as expressing some aspect or element of religion in its simplest and deepest form—as uttering the soul's fundamental experiences of God—but can we say the same of this? or does it not carry us into another world when we read: "Oh that thou wouldest slay the wicked, God! Depart from me, therefore, ye bloodthirsty men. Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate Thee, and do not I loathe them that rise up against Thee? I hate them with perfect hatred, I count them mine enemies." How, it may be asked, can a soul which has been flooded with the consciousness of God, of His intimate nearness, of His all penetrating love, how can such a soul be overcome by such a temper? Surely these are not pious prayers; but savage and inhuman, a melancholy illustration of the inconsistencies which lower human nature even at its height.

I cannot think that in a mind so great as that of the writer of this Psalm—and one might even say in a work of art so perfect—there should be an unprovoked and sudden lapse into mere inconsistency. There must be a connexion in thought between these passionate words and what precedes, and I believe it is not hard to find. The Psalmist has been dwelling on what I have called the unity of the natural and the moral worlds, the truth that God is behind both, that it is the same power which speaks in conscience, revealing man to himself, and which originates and sustains that physical being in which man lives his moral life. These are real truths and experiences, and religion

depends for its very being on the recognition of them. But it is possible to recognize them in a way which is fatal to religion. It is possible to lose in the sense of the unity of nature and the moral life as alike dependent on God the sense of the vital differences with which they confront us. It is possible to become insensible to the fact that God is not only the source of all being, but of the distinction between good and evil, and that to assert the distinction is as essential to religion as to assert the unity of God and the dependence of all things on Him. Christ, says a French writer, has two great enemies, the God Priapus and the God Pan, and the latter is the more impracticable of the two. The most dangerous enemy of religion is the mood in which all the differences in the world seem to become unreal in face of the unity of God. The difference between nature and spirit, between the personal and the impersonal, between freedom and necessity, between what we are born and what we make of ourselves, between corporate responsibility and the responsibility of the individual—the difference in the last resort of right and wrong—all these are relative, evanescent, never to be fixed; they dissolve, when we try to grasp them, in a kind of moral or non-moral haze. This is the supreme illustration of the truth that the corruption of the best is worst; for there is no better or more inspiring truth than that of the dependence of all being, natural and moral, upon God; and no error more deadly or degrading than that to God all things are alike. It is against the temptation to let the truth which he has just recognized in such moving words sink into this deadly falsehood that the soul of the Psalmist reacts with instinctive and passionate vehemence. He

knows that the world and every human being in it are absolutely dependent upon God; but he knows also that what is going on in the world is a battle, and that it is the Lord's battle, and that it is vital to be on the Lord's side. No doubt the passion with which he casts himself into the battle is less than Christian passion. He is ready to kill in the battle, and perhaps not ready to die. But in the Lord's battle the sign under which we conquer is the cross. It is not by shedding the blood of others, but by the sacrifice of our own life, that we can contribute to the Lord's victory. But where the Psalmist is right, and where we must not fall beneath his insight, is in the clear perception that the reality of religion involves conflict—that what is going on among men in the world is a battle in which the cause of God is at stake—a battle, and not a sham fight. God is not in the same sense on both sides. It is not a game of draughts in which the same hand moves the blacks and the whites. It is a matter of life and death, and the Psalmist is *in* it for life or death, with his whole heart. So must every one be who would prove what the presence of God in life means. The cross of Christ, where He died for the difference between right and wrong, and declared it to be as real as His agony and passion, teaches the same truth as the vehement Psalmist, and makes the same appeal. "Who is on the Lord's side?" it calls to us as we look out upon life. And it is only as we enlist under that ensign, and commit ourselves to fight the good fight to the last, that we can share in the experiences which inspired this wonderful Psalm.

There is something peculiarly touching in the closing lines. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try

me, and know my thoughts ; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." It is as if the Psalmist shrank suddenly from his own impetuosity, felt his rashness in judging others, and realized that it is easier to slay the wicked than to be inwardly separated from sin. In this humbler mood he does not shrink from God's eye, but longs for it. He feels that for God to take knowledge of him is his hope. Salvation does not come from his zeal, but from the Lord, who knows him altogether. It is exactly in the key in which the Samaritan woman speaks of Jesus : "Come, see a man which told me all things that ever I did ; is not this the Christ ?" It is only one who knows us better than we know ourselves who can give us the life which is life indeed.